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Meetings' Notes Show the Unvarnished Haig

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It is 8:30 on the morning of Jan. 18. Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr., at the head of the table in his seventh-floor State Department conference room, is speaking. This is his regular senior staff meeting, and he is reviewing a four-day trip he just completed in the Middle East. The picture he paints of U.S. prospects in that region is grim.

Despite his public optimism over the continuation of the Camp David peace process after Israel's scheduled April return of the Sinai to Egypt, Haig has come back convinced that once the Sinai transfer takes place the delicate web that ties Israel and Egypt together will unravel quickly, and as a result Washington will be the loser.

"Egypt will go back in to [the] Arab world with [the] U.S. isolated as Israel's sole defender," Haig says, according to notes taken by one participant at this Jan. 18 meeting.

This is a much grimmer assessment on U.S. prospects in the Middle East than Haig has ever given publicly or even as the anonymous senior official traveling on and speaking from his airplane.

Noting that his efforts in travels throughout the region should not be misinterpreted as a repeat of former secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger's whirlwind shuttle diplomacy of the early 1970s, Haig says, "I didn't go over to pull a rabbit out of the hat a la Kissinger . . . This secretary of state is not putting on Kissinger's fedora."

Notes taken by one of the people present at nearly two dozen regular senior staff meetings over the last year have been obtained by The Washington Post and verified, as to general content, with two other participants.

These notes record dozens of Haig's private and apparently candid pronouncements on the serious foreign policy issues of the day.

During these conversations with his top staffers Haig makes many statements previously unknown to the public, on topics ranging from the Middle East, our European allies, the Soviet Union, China and Poland to Haig's difficulties in dealing with White House decision makers, conservative ideologues in the Republican Party and the latest news leaks.

In all, the notes provide a behind-the-scenes portrait of a secretary of state who talks even tougher in private than in public. On Oct. 15, for example, Haig calls British Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington a "duplicitous bastard" for his handling of one Middle East matter.

There are dozens of meetings, perhaps as many as 100, for which The Post does not have the notes, so the picture that emerges is incomplete. Haig has been a controversial figure in Washington since his days in the Nixon administration as White House chief of staff, and many have questioned his outspoken and sometimes volatile nature. At the same time many are strong admirers, including President Reagan. Both critics and admirers will find evidence in the material to support their views of the man.

Those who normally attend the regular weekday morning meeting include the deputy secretary of state, the four undersecretaries, the assistant secretaries for congressional relations and public affairs and the heads of various offices, such as intelligence. In addition, several members of Haig's personal staff are regularly there.

The notes show Haig as a man who is knowledgeable and deeply concerned about foreign affairs, possessed of a cynical view of the Soviets and desiring continuity in American foreign policy with adherence to previous commitments.

The notes also show Haig's admiration for Reagan's ability to charm and influence others. In the Oct. 15 meeting, after receiving a pessimistic forecast on winning congressional approval of the proposed Saudi airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft sale, Haig says of the prospects of turning it around: "The only way is presidential one-on-ones."

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In the Oct. 15 meeting, when the issue of future grain sales to the Soviet Union comes up, Haig says he does not want any negotiations on a five-year grain deal with cut-rate prices until after next year. "Even then maybe I'll say no on this," he says, adding a note of concern. "The president must back us."

It was unclear why Haig spoke of "cut-rate" prices, since the Soviet-American five-year agreement that expired last October was for grain sales to the Soviets at regular commercial rates.

These notes represent the words spoken by Haig, but in many cases do not include small words such as a, an, the, is, the kind of words that might be left out by a non-professional note taker or someone without stenographic training.

The notes include these assertions on the following topics:

• Poland (Dec. 15), just two days after the martial law crackdown: "We have evidence of Soviet involvement in all planning of Polish moves."

• Defense (Jan. 18): "We never articulated our defense strategy in a coherent way . . . perception in country that we're just sinking bucks into defense without an overall strategy." In a June 6 discussion about the proposed AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia Haig calls the Pentagon "naive."

• The conservative loyalists of Reagan (Feb. 5): "Everything we've done has been torpedoed at every turn by the ideologues. The president knows this and is sensitive to it . . . . [We] need to educate the Jack Kemps of the world," a reference to the Republican New York congressman who is a conservative Reagan supporter.

• The private business sector (July 8): " 'Let the private sector do it' is the Republican catchword and slogan when it doesn't want to spend money." Given his earlier experience as head of United Technologies Corp., Haig says the "private sector is fed up. Need to set up government apparatus and private sector will follow if it is there," and too frequently all the talk amounts to a "pie in the sky" that has no meaning.

• The Reagan staff (Mar. 12): "Unbelievable maze in the White House," and (Oct. 15) when Haig wants to recommend some changes on an upcoming presidential speech: "Most unbelievable way to do business. Don't know who to call." He lists four possibilities of whom he might call on that one speech: then-domestic affairs adviser Martin Anderson, White House chief of staff James A. Baker III, then-national security affairs adviser Richard V. Allen and deputy White House chief of staff Michael K. Deaver.

• On the draft of the speech Reagan was scheduled to give in Philadelphia (Oct. 15): "We have to drive out the arrogant, belligerent tone of speech." He again called the draft "the height of arrogance," adding that the news media would tell Reagan if the State Department didn't. The Reagan speech as delivered later that day seemed to have none of the tone to which Haig referred.

• On intelligence (Feb. 19, 1981): Under President Carter there was a "conscious castration of America's eyes and ears around the world."

• Strategy (Mar. 27): "When crisis occurs, that is the time to move with other issues," and in such a crisis "legislative obstacles tend to crumble."

• News leaks (June 6): "One big fat pain in the ass," and on Nov. 9, " . . . Too much stuff coming out of the department . . . . Too much access by muckrakers . . . . Any time they want a comment, they get it . . . . Suggest you bear down on this. I want to show the great Washington press corps that we are disciplined. No objectivity in exercise of the press. Bottom line is always the fellow who wants to talk the longest and loudest."

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